Romeo and Juliet

by Peter Cash



English Association Shakespeare Bookmarks
Longer Commentaries No. 1

Romeo and Juliet (1595)

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SCOPE OF TOPIC

Has any Shakespeare play been more often set for study at GCSE Level than the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*? Consequently, this Bookmark seeks to give a scene-by-scene account of the play by which all students can take their bearings. At the same time as it follows Shakespeare's narrative, this Bookmark examines his treatment of the tragic genre and his presentation of character. Above all, it looks at the attitudes to love that Shakespeare's characters express, not least the way in which their contrasting uses of language indicate its place in the scale of human values.

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Prologue

Romeo and Juliet is unlike other/later Shakespearean tragedies in that it does not conform to Aristotle's model. In his ***Poetics***, Aristotle asserts that the tragic hero is a man of high estate in whose character lurks one fatal flaw. It is in ***Hamlet*** (1600) that a tragic hero explains what *hamartia* is. To his friend Horatio, Hamlet explains that there are certain men whose fortunes are endangered by a single failing of character:

> So, oft it chances in particular men,
> That for some vicious mole of nature in them,
> As, in their birth — wherein they are not guilty,
> Since nature cannot choose his origin —
> By the o'ergrowth of some complexion,
> Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason,
> Or by some habit that too much o'er-leavens
> The form of plausive manners, that these men,
> Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,
> Being nature's livery, or fortune's star —
> Their virtues else — be they as pure as grace,
> As infinite as man may undergo —
> Shall in the general censure take corruption
> From that particular fault.

Of course, the proleptic irony is entirely and intentionally at Hamlet's own expense. In Act I Scene 4, Shakespeare puts these lines into Hamlet's mouth in order to signal that he is not aware of the hamartic element in his own soul: he does not recognise that he himself is one of the very men about whom he is talking. Ironically, his metaphors – 'some vicious mole of nature', 'the stamp of one defect' – pick up the idea that *he* is an Achillean figure: that is, a paragon of virtue whose exposed heel – through no 'fault' of his own – remains vulnerable to fatal attack. According to the Aristotelian pattern of tragedy, such *hubris* [= a man's arrogant/false assumption of his own invulnerability] logically invites his *nemesis* [= his come-uppance].

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In Aristotelian tragedies, the fate of the hero grows directly out of his character: in ***Hamlet***, Hamlet's fall is a deserved and just result of his tendency to procrastinate. In his essay of 1949, Donald A. Stauffer takes a look at 'this line of thinking' – "that the causes of tragedy lie in the sufferers themselves" – and sees that it does *not* apply to Romeo and/or Juliet. He observes that, in ***Romeo and Juliet***, the hero and the heroine do not receive their just deserts: in this tragedy, their deaths are by no means the logical consequences of character failings, but result (see Act V Scene 2) from an unrelated twist of fate.

Shakespeare's ***Romeo and Juliet*** is set in Verona. At the start, there is already in existence a feud between the Montagues (Romeo's family) and the Capulets (Juliet's family). Because of its Italian setting, it is easy to imagine that this rivalry is between two mafia families: that each has a vendetta against the other.

Between these Veronese families, there is an 'ancient grudge' of which the historic cause is never disclosed. For the purpose of the tragedy, it is sufficient simply that this conflict should re-surface in a 'new mutiny': that Fate – in the form of this 'grudge' – should complicate a romance between two children from the opposing families. Consequently, Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet make 'a pair of star-crossed lovers': according to this star-image, their unnecessary suicide-pact is an astrological accident waiting to happen. In his **Prologue,** Shakespeare's Chorus (often embodied by Escalus, Prince of Verona) tells us that this play will be the tragedy of 'their death-marked love'.

ACT I Scene 1

The purpose of this first scene is to illustrate the animosity that pre-exists between the Montagues and the Capulets. Gregory and Sampson are servants of the Capulet household. It is significant that they wear 'swords and bucklers'; these items of costume signify that, although they are civilians, they live in a violent neighbourhood and face a daily danger – namely, members of the Montague household – against which they must protect themselves. Twice, Sampson refers to a Montague as 'a dog', thereby emphasising that his enemy is less than human.

Consistently, Sampson's language – he will 'thrust' the Montague maids to the wall and 'cut off' their maidenheads – reflects the aggressive, hostile attitude of the Capulets to the Montagues. Given the chance, Sampson would have no hesitation in raping their defenceless women: "Me they shall feel while I am able to stand." So intense is his hatred of the Montagues – even their women – that he 'stands' ready to practise an indiscriminate violence against them.

The language of this scene is typical of the play. Shakespeare makes an extensive use of puns: that is, of words which are similar in pronunciation, but dramatically different in meaning. In this scene, these homophones are of an explicitly sexual nature. Sampson's imperative – "Take it in what sense thou wilt" – exemplifies Shakespeare's ambiguous use of language: throughout the play, there is a complex attitude to sexual engagement that this usage reflects.

In his introduction to the New Penguin edition of the play, first published in 1967, T. J. B. Spencer points out that, before ***Romeo and Juliet***, 'nothing in European drama had ... achieved the organisation of so much human experience.' It is easy to overlook this achievement: even though the play may not conform to the classical model of tragedy, it is remarkable for first presenting us with conflicting ways of thinking about the love between men and women. In ***Romeo and Juliet***, Shakespeare's aim is to provide us with a criticism of romantic love: constantly, there is a tension between a romantic view of love (reflected in poetic language) and an anti-romantic view of love (reflected in realistic language).

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T. J. B. Spencer goes on: 'Throughout the first half of the play, there are constant and deliberate collisions between romantic and unromantic views of love.' Sampson's language, then, is successful in representing one of the points of view that dominate the play: namely, that love is sex.[1] The function of Sampson's *double entendres* – "my naked weapon is out" – is to reduce romantic expression to its most realistic level. Like Mercutio, he is interested in finding the lowest common denominator between man and beast.

To dramatise the feud, Shakespeare stages a skirmish between the Montagues and the Capulets: *They fight*. The trouble-maker is Lord and Lady Capulet's nephew, Tybalt; the epithet by which he is known – 'the fiery Tybalt' – is an immediate signal of his importance to the plot. Although he appears in only three scenes and appears in them only briefly, Tybalt – 'fiery', irascible, the embodiment of 'pernicious rage' – is the catalyst for the tragic action. Here, Prince Escalus is required to intervene and warn both Montagues and Capulets that, if their families engage in a fourth street-brawl, then they will do so 'on pain of death'. It is within this framework that the altercation of Act III Scene 1 will take place, the 'fatal brawl' that results in Romeo's enforced separation from Juliet.

Shakespeare prepares us for Romeo's entrance. Benvolio reports that he saw Romeo an hour before dawn wandering alone through the woods. It was clear to him that Romeo was in a melancholy humour and was best left alone. Montague confirms that his son wants to be left alone:

> Away from light steals home my heavy son
> And private in his chamber pens himself
> Shuts up his windows, locks fair daylight out,
> And makes himself an artificial night.

It is clear that Romeo is in a fit of depression and prefers his own company. Such anti-social behaviour suggests that he is in love; he is suffering from lovesickness, clearly exhibiting its traditional symptoms, locking himself away from the world and keeping his own counsel: "But he, his own affections' counsellor/Is to himself" (Montague).

Upon his entrance, Romeo plays the role of a romantic lover: for him, time passes slowly while he is out of the company of his sweetheart ("Ay me! sad hours seem long"). Worse, he is an unrequited lover: that is, his sweetheart Rosaline does not reciprocate his feelings.[2] How, then, can his experience of love be in any way complete? Romeo's liberal use of apostrophes ("O brawling love, O loving hate") and his self-conscious definition of love –

> Love is a smoke made with the fume of sighs;
> Being purged, a fire sparkling in lover's eyes;
> Being vexed, a sea nourished with lover's tears

– confirm that he is not in true love. Like a courtly lover, he cultivates a series of 'loving terms'; using the language of hyperbole, he exaggerates his feelings carefully, but does not express them sincerely. He is not truly in love; he only thinks that he is. He is merely playing at being in love, taking the side of Cupid (the god of love) against Diana (the goddess of chastity). He is in a black humour, not because Rosaline's coyness is a crime, but because it requires from her disappointed suitor an appropriate show of despondency.

The scene ends on a note of dramatic irony. In effect, Romeo vows that he will have nothing more to do with women: we know, whereas he doesn't, that such cynicism is 'passing' ...

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[1] In Iago's words, love is merely 'a lust of the blood and a permission of the will' (*Othello*, Act I Scene 3).
[2] In Act I Scene 4, Mercutio will refer explicitly to 'that same pale-hearted wench, that Rosaline' and also call her 'a white wench with a black eye'. Such epithets are designed to express his scorn for her pallor: that is, for her pitiless lack of passion.

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ACT I Scene 2

In the first half of this scene, Old Capulet is arranging the marriage of his only daughter to County Paris: to his credit, he is concerned that Juliet – who 'hath not seen the change of fourteen years' – is too young to be married and he urges her suitor to wait for 'two more summers'. Because Paris ('gentle Paris') is such an eligible bachelor, Capulet relents: if Paris is able to 'woo' Juliet and 'get her heart', then he will give his 'consent'. Throughout the play, Shakespeare creates perspectives in which Romeo and Juliet's love can be viewed: here, Paris' pursuit of a formal contract with Juliet sets the standard by which Romeo's passionate commitment to her can be judged.

At the end of this exchange, Capulet announces that he is about to 'hold an old accustomed feast' and sends a servant into the streets of Verona in search of the families whom he wishes to invite. Unfortunately, the Servant is illiterate and cannot read the names on the invitation …

In the second half of this scene, Romeo and Benvolio continue to discuss Rosaline. It is mid-July: ironically, Romeo is one of the 'lusty young men' of Verona whose thoughts – in the heat of high summer – are thoughts of love. For the time being, he continues to adopt the postures of an unrequited lover, insisting in a series of over-statements that his love is merely a form of madness: "Not mad, but bound more than a madman is". He feels 'bound' to make affected gestures which show how sorry for himself he is; he cannot eat for his lovesickness ('kept without my food') and is desperate for some resolution to his 'misery' …

During this discussion, Romeo encounters the illiterate messenger and intercepts the invitation to the Capulets' feast. Benvolio exploits this opportunity and suggests that they gate-crash the feast …

Romeo lacks experience. Benvolio's function is to minister to his friend's inexperience and immaturity: in this role, he explains to Romeo that, at the Capulets' feast, he will see 'all the admirèd beauties of Verona'; with a dramatic irony, he promises to show him a girl who will make Rosaline look like a 'crow'. Romeo, of course, will not be told. Incredulous, he retorts:

> One fairer than my love? The all-seeing sun
> Ne'er saw her match since first the world begun.

Like a true courtier, he composes a rhyming couplet that typically over-states his feelings and totally over-estimates Rosaline's importance. By contrast, Benvolio (as his name suggests) is well-meaning and wise enough to know that Romeo prizes Rosaline's beauty only because he has not given himself time to compare it. Whereas Benvolio knows that Rosaline's beauty will suffer by wider comparison, Romeo refuses to listen to his advice and – headstrong and self-satisfied – sets off for this dangerous party primarily in order to prove his own point ('to rejoice in splendour of mine own'). Although he is a Montague, he decides to risk attending the Capulets' house-party in the certain hope of seeing Rosaline there … To coin a phrase, he does not yet know how many more fish there are in the Adriatic Sea.

ACT I Scene 3

The purpose of this scene is to introduce us to the Capulet household. The function of the Nurse's first words – "by my maidenhead at twelve year old" – is to introduce us to the marital customs of Renaissance Italy; her oath prepares us for the fact that Juliet is to be married off at the time of her fourteenth birthday.[3] The Nurse's terms of endearment – "What, lamb! What, ladybird!" – confirm Juliet's youthful innocence.

[3] Four times in this scene, Lady Capulet (aged about 29) and the Nurse reiterate Old Capulet's concern that Juliet is still thirteen years of age: 'not fourteen'. Such a very young age is not consistent with

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The Nurse – Angelica – was Juliet's wet-nurse: instantly, she reveals that the Capulets employed her after her own baby daughter Susan had died.[4] From her first speeches, it becomes clear that she is extremely talkative; before long, her loquacious nature gets on Lady Capulet's nerves: "I pray thee hold thy peace." It also emerges that the Nurse's thoughts are of an explicitly sexual nature; her memory of her late husband's words to the baby Juliet – "Thou wilt fall backward when thou comest to age" – reveals this salacious pre-occupation. Now that Juliet is 'of a pretty age', her Nurse takes a prurient delight in imagining her upon her back beneath a man; she takes a vicarious interest in Juliet's sexual growth. Embarrassed by the Nurse's keen interest in her sex life, Juliet blushes and also complains about her garrulous nature: "And stint thou too …" Between the Nurse (with her realistic attitude to love) and Juliet (with her romantic attitude to sex) there is a major contrast which will recur throughout the play.

It is in this context that Lady Capulet broaches the subject of marriage with her thirteen-year-old daughter.[5] Following up her husband's meeting with Paris, Lady Capulet reflects that she herself was little more than fourteen when she gave birth to Juliet and then gets to the point: "The valiant Paris seeks you for his love." Over the next twenty lines, she keeps to the point. Here, the insistent movement of the blank verse –

> What say you? Can you love the gentleman?
> This night you shall behold him at our feast

– conveys Lady Capulet's insistence that her young daughter accept a young man whom she has not yet even seen. Pre-empting any possible misgivings, she tells Juliet to run her eye over him and 'find delight' in every one of his features. Lady Capulet is a brow-beater. She does not so much adopt a no-nonsense approach as bully her child into submission to an arranged marriage: "Speak briefly, can you like of Paris' love?" Duty-bound to obey her strict parents, Juliet – at this initial stage – is nothing but compliant with their sharp demands: "I'll look to like, if looking liking move." Translated into modern parlance: "If, as you say, it's possible to judge soundly by appearances, then I'll do my best, Mum." What is more, she will not 'like' any face which she sees/not do any 'liking' without her mother's 'consent' …

The first irony is at Lady Capulet's expense. Given the idea that a girl can fall in love with a boy at first sight, Juliet needs to take only one look at Romeo – not Paris – to convince herself that her mother ('find delight writ there with beauty's pen') was right. The second irony, of course, is at Juliet's expense. Here, as in ***A Midsummer Night's Dream***, a play of the same year, love looks overpoweringly with the eyes: once she has set eyes on Romeo, Juliet finds that her love for him physically overpowers any ethical regard for parental 'consent'. By such means, the play arrives at its supreme rating of romantic love in the scale of human values.

ACT I Scene 4

In this scene, Romeo embarks upon a night out with the lads, Mercutio and Benvolio. This gang of eight or nine Montagues is heading for the feast/party at the Capulets' house with the foolhardy intention of gate-crashing it.

Romeo, though, does not feel like one of the lads. He is in no mood for dancing; he feels both heavy-footed and heavy-hearted. Down-hearted, he has 'a soul of lead' and toys self-consciously with words ('saw'/'sore', 'bound'/'bound'). It is at this stage that Mercutio starts to question Romeo's romantic attitude to women. Romeo's musings –

Shakespeare's sources: in Matteo Bandello's story of 1554, Juliet is eighteen; in Arthur Brooke's long poem of 1562, she is sixteen.

[4] The Nurse tells us that both Juliet and Susan were born on Lammas Eve: 31st July (which may explain how the Capulets chose their daughter's name).

[5] Juliet will be fourteen in 'a fortnight and odd days' (Lady Capulet).

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Is love a tender thing? It is too rough,
Too rude, too boisterous, and it pricks like a thorn

– bring from Mercutio a ribald criticism of such a precious posture. Mercutio's salacious language – "Prick love for pricking" – expresses an anti-romantic and ultra-realistic view of love-affairs. In its opening-up of perspectives, the play itself will go on to set Romeo's idealistic view of love [= that it *is* both a many-splendoured and 'a tender thing'] against Mercutio's 'scoffing treatment of love' (Spencer).

Mercutio is an anti-romantic, an anti-hero; his primary function in the play is to express a realistic view of love.[6] Nowhere does he carry out this role more eloquently than in the exchanges with Romeo which terminate in his Queen Mab speech. Essentially, Mercutio's thesis is that the dreams which lovers have are deceptive: in his view, 'dreamers often lie'. Delicate though Queen Mab may be, she is actually spiteful:

She is the fairies' midwife, and she comes
In shape no bigger than an agate stone
On the forefinger of an alderman

Queen Mab is a 'midwife' in that she assists at the birth of those dreams by which lovers are deceived. Shakespeare is at great pains to describe Queen Mab's world on a miniature scale: because she herself is no bigger than a jewel, she can ride comfortably in 'an empty hazelnut'; on this chariot, the wheel-spokes are made of spiders' legs and the reins of spiders' webs. Such detail shows what an exiguous creature Queen Mab is and allows us to understand how insidiously she operates. The point is that 'she gallops night by night through lovers' brains', awakening their hopeless ambitions and ridiculous desires. This 'hag', concludes Mercutio, has an especially malign effect on sleeping virgins: 'when maids lie on their backs', she 'presses them' [= makes them imagine that a man is on top of them] and gives them erotic dreams/false dreams of a life-time of pleasure.

Mercutio is not only loquacious, but also sagacious. It is for this second reason, not because he is rambling on, that Romeo shuts him up:

Peace, peace, Mercutio, peace!
Thou talkest of nothing.

In his romantic frame of mind, he does not want to hear what his friend is saying. Of course, there is an irony in Romeo's assertion that Mercutio talks 'of nothing': if he does, then Romeo's own dream – that true love will last forever – must itself be nothing, for Mercutio's entire speech has been devoted to establishing this very point. Consistently, Mercutio –

True. I talk of dreams;
Which are the children of an idle brain,
Begot of nothing but vain fantasy

– makes no concession to Romeo's protest, but reiterates that all talk 'of dreams' [= of true and everlasting love] is but 'idle' banter. Such dreaming, he states categorically, is 'nothing but vain fantasy'.

Mercutio's speech makes an impact upon Romeo. Suddenly, Romeo has a premonition that Fate may blight his romantic career/that he may be a star-crossed lover: "Some consequence, yet hanging in the stars". His speech contains a proleptic irony that echoes throughout the play: prophetically, he fears that, 'with this night's revels', there may begin a course of events

[6] T. J. B. Spencer explains that Shakespeare took this name from Arthur Brooke's poem of 1562: there, Mercutio 'is a 'mercurial' type ... sprightly, quick-witted, volatile.'

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which will result in 'untimely death'. Although Romeo is tragically right, his prophecy begs a question: why is he right? In 1595, Shakespeare was a young playwright who may simply have been happy to share his audience's confidence in the astrological causes of events: as Spencer points out, "the belief in the fateful *influence* of the stars upon human life was a convenient one for dramatic purposes."

Donald A. Stauffer concludes that "this play is a tragedy [but] may fail as serious tragedy because Shakespeare blurs the focus and never makes up his mind entirely as to who is being punished, and for what reason". He means that Shakespeare does not indicate with any clarity whether he blames Fate or the Capulets or Friar Laurence or Romeo for the tragedy.

ACT I Scene 5

The purpose of the exchanges between the four servants (*Servingmen come forth with napkins*) is to create an atmosphere of excited hustle and bustle. Their antics create in us a sense of eager anticipation: with them, we have great expectations of the feast/party in the Great Chamber of the Capulet household.

Capulet's remark that he has 'seen the day' when he could whisper in a fair lady's ear is an admission that he has seen better days: significantly, it is more than twenty-five years since he flirted at a masked ball. Such a confession puts him at some distance from the younger generation: as we shall see, he neither thinks nor feels as it does.

Romeo falls in love with Juliet at first sight. His poetic use of language –

> O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!
> It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night
> As a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear –
> Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear!

– is designed to signify a growth in Romeo's maturity. Some enchanted evening, he has seen a face across a crowded room and fallen instantly in love; his first sight of Juliet has inspired him to employ a brilliant imagery. Of course, there is already in this moment of revelation a tragic irony: namely, that Juliet's beauty is – as he predicts – 'for earth too dear'.

Romeo has come to respect Benvolio's advice: beside Juliet, Rosaline does now look like a crow. Romeo's couplet –

> Did my heart love till now? Forswear it sight!
> For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night

– indicates that he has the capacity to learn from his experiences. Almost instinctively, he is admitting that Benvolio was right and is learning the error of his ways. At this point, Romeo stops posturing and starts expressing genuine feeling.

Romeo reveals not only his love for the beautiful Juliet, but also his presence to her quarrelsome cousin Tybalt – who recognises his voice. Cynical, Tybalt insists on thinking the worst of Romeo: namely, that he is a foe who has come to 'scorn at' their solemn festivity. Here, Shakespeare's aim is to remind us that the Montague-Capulet feud is intense and ever likely to erupt in violence. Tybalt uses an emotive language: three times, he calls Romeo a 'villain'.

Speaking through his teeth, Capulet is at great pains to restrain and appease his abrasive nephew: in his opinion, Tybalt is 'a saucy boy', 'a princox'. For this restraint, there are three possible reasons: first, he does not want to spoil his party; second, he is mindful of Prince Escalus' ultimatum; third, he feels that Romeo is 'a virtuous and well-governed youth' – which

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epithet, coming from his natural enemy, is a sound reference to Romeo's good character. Unwillingly restrained, Tybalt makes a sinister prophecy:

> But this intrusion shall,
> Now seeming sweet, convert to bitterest gall.

Here is another proleptic irony in that Tybalt's couplet includes within its scope not only Mercutio's death, but also Romeo and Juliet's suicides.

There is a dramatic contrast between Tybalt's hatred and Romeo and Juliet's love. In this passage, Romeo and Juliet share a duet in which they make formal declarations of love to each other. It is important to note that their exchanges over the next fourteen lines –

> ROMEO: My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
> To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.
>
> JULIET: Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
> Which mannerly devotion shows in this

– add up to a sonnet in which an opening octave is followed by a concluding sestet. This sharing of lines, this use of stichomythia, has the effect of showing how closely intertwined Romeo and Juliet are: in this sonnet, they copulate their love rhetorically. By these poetic means, Shakespeare couples them, weds them together. Furthermore, his use of a religious imagery ('shrine', 'pilgrim', 'saints', 'palmers', 'prayer') suggests the reverence in which the two speakers already hold each other. Such language ('sin', 'devotion') expresses each adolescent's sense of wonder at his/her own inflamed feelings.

Quickly, it becomes apparent that this crossing of paths is tragic. From the Nurse, Romeo learns that Juliet is a Capulet. Once again, his statement – "My life is my foe's debt" – is ironic, for Romeo's life (as things turn out) *is* in his foe's hands. From the Nurse, Juliet learns that Romeo is a Montague. Similarly, her statement –

> If he be marrièd,
> My grave is like to be my wedding bed

– echoes ominously with a forward-looking/proleptic irony. The entire movement of the play is towards the Elizabethan realisation that Romeo and Juliet's wedding bed is a grave. Juliet's exclamation – "My only love, sprung from my only hate!" – emphasises the tragic situation in which they suddenly find themselves.

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ACT II Scene 1

The function of the Chorus is to summarise the progress of the story. He announces that the time has come for the younger generation to come into its own. Furthermore, he identifies the particular problem that Romeo faces: because he is a Montague, 'he may not have access' to Juliet's house. But he also explains that 'passion lends them to power' to overcome this barrier.

Now that the party is over, the Montagues depart to drown their various sorrows. Romeo, though he can hardly tear himself away, goes off on his own. Benvolio and Mercutio, who are both the worse for drink, enter in search of him. Mercutio is no less cynical and no less loquacious for being drunk. His critical parody of lovers' language –

> Speak but one rhyme, and I am satisfied.

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Cry but 'Ay me!' Pronounce but 'love' and 'dove'

– is especially ironic in that it satirises the very terms in which Romeo and Juliet have just addressed each other, even down to their banal rhymes. He remains bitterly critical of such self-conscious posturing.

Of course, Mercutio thinks that Romeo is still in love with Rosaline and composes a spell in which he combines her romantic attributes ('her high forehead', 'her fine foot') with a more realistic description of her charms ('quivering thigh'). Mercutio's bawdy comments –

'Twould anger him
To raise a spirit in his mistress' circle
Of some strange nature, letting it there stand
Till she had laid it and conjured it down

– attempt to reduce Romeo's finer feelings to a mechanical act of intercourse; here, the practice of a magician becomes a metaphor for the mechanics of a male orgasm. Benvolio – 'Blind is his love and best befits the dark' – makes a remark that echoes with a tragic irony. In attempting to make fun of Romeo's love for Rosaline, he inadvertently makes serious sense of Romeo's blind passion for Juliet: that is, Romeo is blind to the family feud that results in his death ('the dark'). Increasingly inebriated, Mercutio does not mince his words. His wit at Romeo's expense –

O, Romeo, that she were, O that she were
An open-arse and thou a poppering pear!

– is ribald: moreover, it manifests itself in a contemptuous demonstration of the conflict between a romantic and a realistic approach to sexual attraction. Here, he follows a mocking rendition of a lover's plea with a sordid description of a lover's position/practice. Clearly, he is suggesting that romantic jargon merely disguises a more realistic intention.

ACT II Scene 2

In order to escape Mercutio's intoxicated humour, Romeo has cleared the Capulets' wall and ended up in their orchard where he has been eavesdropping upon his kinsman's bawdy remarks at his expense. Romeo, however, refuses to rise to Mercutio's taunts; he emerges from his hiding place simply to reflect that Mercutio reduces love to sex merely because he has never been in true love: "He jests at scars that never felt a wound." In Romeo's new opinion, Mercutio talks in this licentious manner because he knows no better.

Upon Juliet's appearance at her balcony, Romeo delivers the most famous speech of the play. Romeo describes Juliet in a series of cosmic images that exaggerates her beauty:

But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?
It is the East, and Juliet is the sun!

He uses these hyperboles [= she is more beautiful than the moon, her eyes outshine the stars] in order to elevate Juliet to the status of goddess. In his affections, she reigns supreme: even Diana, the moon goddess of chastity, is 'envious' of her. In dramatic terms, the Capulets' balcony is an obvious and tangible symbol of the barrier between Romeo and Juliet. Romeo's apostrophe –

O, it is my love!
O that she knew she were!

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– identifies the problem of access to Juliet which besets these lovers. It is just such a difficulty in communication, a difficulty for one in knowing what the other is doing, that ultimately brings about their tragedy.

Romeo speaks entirely in the clichés of romantic love. He expresses an unqualified admiration of his mistress:

> See how she leans her cheek upon her hand!

Such an ordinary action is not even noteworthy, but Romeo is so enamoured of this girl that he worships her every movement. His wishful thinking – "O that I were a glove upon that hand!" – is another over-elaboration. Indeed, some of Romeo's thinking is almost comical: because Juliet is on a balcony over his head, he compares her instantly to an angel: "A wingèd messenger of heaven". Suddenly, Juliet is his ideal woman. In this scene, the Capulets' balcony also symbolises the pedestal upon which he has put her; in addition, it forces him to worship her from afar.

Juliet's plaintive plea – "O Romeo, Romeo – wherefore art thou Romeo?" – illustrates her own abandonment of herself to love. Even so, Juliet emerges quickly as a careful and thoughtful character who is more aware than Romeo of the risks that their passionate love involves. In 1949, Donald A. Stauffer wrote that "the dangerous fault of the two lovers is their extreme rashness." In 1967, T. J. B. Spencer is careful not to run away with this convenient idea: "In spite of her self-abandonment to love, Juliet is strong and practical." At once, she brings her clear-sightedness to the problem of Romeo's surname:

> What's in a name? That which we call a rose
> By any other word would smell as sweet.

Immediately, she applies a sharp intellect to her anguish and differentiates between a thing and its label. She shows wisdom: more clearly than the older generation, she understands that a man's name goes no way towards describing his character; no matter what one calls it, 'a rose' [= a handsome young man] retains its physical beauty and its integrity.

This scene provides us with major insights into Romeo and Juliet's characters. Romeo is no longer playing the studied part of a courtly lover who must behave with a respectful restraint. It is clear from Juliet's emphatic warning – "If they do see thee, they will murder thee" – that he is now responding urgently to his true feelings, behaving recklessly and without a care for his own safety. Indeed, Romeo sounds wildly idealistic: it is with 'love's light wings' that he has leapt her orchard wall and with 'night's cloak' that he will hide himself from his enemies. He is in a state of such rapture that he refuses to take seriously the Capulets' threat to him. This exchange –

> ROMEO: Look thou but sweet,
> And I am proof against their enmity.
> JULIET: I would not for the world they saw thee here.
> ROMEO: I have night's cloak to hide me from their eyes.
> An but thou love me, let them find me here

– illustrates the different reactions of Romeo and Juliet to their common situation: whereas Romeo speaks a rhapsodic verse, Juliet talks in 'strong and practical' terms. She is more acutely aware of the risks to his safety than he is and, in spite of her own pressing feelings, counsels caution with a monosyllabic directness: "I would not for the world they saw thee here." Indeed, her next speech –

> O gentle Romeo,
> If thou dost love, pronounce it faithfully

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– suggests that it is precisely because of these feelings that she is cautious. She is equally enraptured with Romeo and fears that he may consider her too forward. Lest he think that she has been 'too quickly won', she volunteers to play the accepted part of a coy mistress until social convention has been satisfied.

Juliet has a more conservative streak in her nature: for instance, she is alarmed when Romeo swears his love by the 'inconstant moon' and even expresses reservations about the sudden flare-up of their passion: "It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden." Contrary to Stauffer's reading, she is on her guard against 'rashness' and extremely wary of their lightning romance.

Romeo and Juliet continue to copulate their love rhetorically: to Romeo's adjective 'unsatisfied', Juliet's noun 'satisfaction' adds a sexual dimension. Furthermore, her expression of her passion –

> My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
> My love as deep

– is equally rhapsodic and places her love on a cosmic scale; she too believes in everlasting love, 'for' – like the sea – her love for him is 'infinite'. Faced with this overwhelming declaration, Romeo becomes afraid that Queen Mab has been with him and that this experience is 'but a dream'. That Juliet should requite his love seems too good to be true.

Ominously, the problem of communication between Romeo and Juliet re-surfaces. It transpires that Juliet cannot send word to Romeo except by means of a go-between: "By one that I'll procure to come to thee." Here lies the fatal flaw in the relationship between Romeo and Juliet: that it cannot be carried on except by the employment of intermediaries. Romeo and Juliet receive their information about and from each other only second hand: built into this unsatisfactory arrangement, as into a game of Chinese Whispers, are time-lags that can and will cause tragic havoc.

Although she never actually says the three little words, Juliet's behaviour is designed to tell Romeo that she loves him. Instead, Shakespeare illustrates her feelings in dramatic movements. First, he shows her as being torn between the Nurse's calls to her to come back into the house and her growing desire to be with Romeo: "My Romeo!" Second, she forgets why she has returned to the balcony: "I have forgot why I did call thee back". Although Juliet is more circumspect and more prudent than her boyfriend, it is important – if her love is to be true to life – that she should on occasion forget to look around her and lack prudence. Her famous farewell –

> Parting is such sweet sorrow
> That I shall say goodnight till it be morrow

– illustrates the oxymoronic nature of Romeo and Juliet's love-affair. It is bitter for them to part, but 'sweet' that they can do so in such loving terms; it is 'sweet' that they love each other, but bitter that their affair is fraught with such serious difficulties. Reluctantly, they go their separate ways, planning to communicate again 'by the hour of nine' on the following day … It is this plan that prepares us for Act II Scene 4 in which Juliet's Nurse reappears in the perilous role of go-between.

At the end of his serenade beneath Juliet's balcony, Romeo, in urgent need of sound advice, heads for the cell of the Franciscan monk, Friar Laurence. In this scene, Romeo has shown himself to be an impetuous youth who has no more than a nonchalant regard for his own safety; he has acted and spoken irrationally. In an Aristotelian tragedy, a traditional tragedy, such impetuosity would be that flaw in Romeo's character which assures his self-destruction; in this tragedy, the hero (as we shall see) takes his own life only in response to a turn of events which is completely outside his control.

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ACT II Scene 3

Friar Laurence introduces himself formally: that is, he speaks a soliloquy of rhyming couplets in which he exhibits his virtuous character. Essentially, he is a diligent and pious character: for instance, he is an early riser because he is eager to pick flowers that possess medical properties. For his wisdom, Friar Laurence goes back to Nature, believing that there is a great/'mickle' power in its resources:

> O mickle is the powerful grace that lies
> In plants, herbs, stones, and their true qualities.

He extols the virtues of homeopathic medicine as if he is delivering a lecture or a sermon, speaking at length on this subject in a didactic tone. Consistently, his homilies –

> For naught so vile that on the earth doth live
> But to the earth some special good doth give

– are true not only in general, but also with particular respect to the action of the play: for instance, out of the 'vile' conflict between the Montagues and the Capulets arises 'some special good' in the form of Romeo and Juliet's exemplary love for each other. Friar Laurence continues in this vein:

> Within the infant rind of this weak flower
> Poison hath residence, and medicine power.

Within the flower of Romeo and Juliet's young love resides both the 'poison' that kills them and the 'medicine' that finally and tragically heals the rift between their warring clans. Prophetic though these sentiments are, Friar Laurence is not a sage, wise before the tragic event. Rather, Shakespeare puts these couplets into his mouth in order to flag up the rough course of Romeo and Juliet's true love. At this point, there is a proleptic irony at the Friar's expense which Romeo's dramatic disclosure – regarding 'the fair daughter of rich Capulet' – is about to reveal.

Of course, Friar Laurence's sententious statements can make him sound as if he is a fuddy-duddy. It is this sanctimonious note that can frequently be heard in the rhyming dialogue with Romeo that follows: on learning that this 'unbruisèd youth' has been up all night, he first patronises Romeo and then expresses horror at the thought that Rosaline may have kept him up: that is, that they have been love-making! Friar Laurence is 'ghostly' in the sense that he is both religious and holier-than-thou: here, he cannot bear to think that his 'good son' has been involved in fornication. Although he makes miscalculations, the Friar always has Romeo's best interests at heart and tries to take pastoral care of him.

Friar Laurence is Romeo's mentor; his dramatic function is to act as Romeo's Father Confessor. It is to him that Romeo confesses his love for Juliet ('fair daughter of rich Capulet') and to him that he declares his honourable intentions ('holy marriage'). Romeo explains that theirs is a whirlwind romance ("We met, we wooed and made exchange of vow") and that they wish to consummate it that very night; he asks the Friar to marry them without further ado. Not surprisingly, Friar Laurence ("Holy St Francis!") is taken aback by this sudden 'change' and advises steadier progress: on hearing that Rosaline has been 'so soon forsaken', he chides his 'good son' for being so fickle in his affections and so hasty in his decisions. His kindly observation –

> Lo, here upon thy cheek the stain doth sit
> Of an old tear that is not washed off yet

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– suggests to Romeo that his new love for Juliet may also be an impetuous infatuation. Emphatically, Romeo reassures his mentor that he is not such a capricious sort. He points out that, whereas Rosaline refused to requite his love, Juliet 'doth grace for grace and love for love allow': in other words, she reciprocates his love. By this reassurance, he persuades Friar Laurence to be his 'assistant' and perform the ceremony: indeed, his 'ghostly' accomplice approaches this enterprise with a tender optimism. Of course, the Friar's optimism –

> For this alliance may so happy prove
> To turn your household's rancour to pure love

– is both sadly misplaced and tragic. It supplies another example of prolepsis, looking forward as it does to the bitterly ironic circumstances in which the Montague-Capulet 'rancour' does eventually turn to love. Friar Laurence counsels well ('Wisely and slow') and means well, but – in the world of Shakespearean tragedy – such good intentions pave the path to 'purgatory, torture, hell itself'.

ACT II Scene 4

Benvolio tells Mercutio that Tybalt – after witnessing Romeo's uninvited presence at the Capulets' party – has challenged Romeo to a duel. Upon hearing his solemn news, Mercutio reacts with a typical frivolity; this reaction confirms that he is a character who cannot take anything seriously. For instance, Mercutio's line – "Alas, poor Romeo, he is already dead" – shows that he is more interested in the metaphorical possibilities of Romeo's situation than the literal reality: he quips that Romeo has already been 'run through the ear with a love song'. To Mercutio, nothing is sacred; recklessly, he mocks every man alike.[7] Not even Tybalt – 'more than Prince of Cats' – is safe from his invective wit: even though Tybalt is a formidable swordsman, an accomplished fencer, Mercutio does not hesitate to make fun of him. Even though Tybalt – 'the very butcher of a silk button' – is an intrepid duelist, Mercutio's tongue does not spare him: in fact, he satirises Tybalt's fascination with the Italian jargon of fencing ("the immortal *passado*! the *punto reverso*!") and scoffs at him for being a 'fashion-monger'.

As soon as Romeo enters, Mercutio turns his satirical attentions to him. Still under the false impression that Romeo is doting on Rosaline, he mocks Romeo's previous lack of perspective:

> Now is he for the numbers that Petrarch flowed in.
> Laura, to his lady, was a kitchen wench.

In a sarcastic tone of voice, Mercutio suggests that, since Romeo's love for Rosaline is unparalleled in the history of human affairs, Laura – the heroine of Petrarch's love sonnets – is but a serving girl by comparison! Mercutio's sharp tongue remains in his cheek; his greeting – 'Signor Romeo, *bon jour*' – adopts the fancy notion that French is the language of romance, but derides it at the same time.

It becomes clear that Romeo's character has matured when – instead of remaining meek and mild – he is quick to engage Mercutio in repartee. It is clear that Romeo has developed his self-confidence and acquired greater self-possession; now, instead of being the butt of Mercutio's jokes, he chats back with a facility which even the quick-witted Mercutio has to admire: "Thy wit is a very bitter sweeting. It is a most sharp sauce." In response, Mercutio essays the plain prose of common sense. His pun on 'art' –

> Now art thou sociable. Now art thou Romeo.[8]
> Now art thou what thou art, by art as well as by nature

[7] Mercutio loves the sound of his own voice: later in this scene, Romeo will explain to the Nurse that he is 'a gentleman … that loves to hear himself talk'.

[8] It should be noted that Mercutio, though he does not overhear Juliet's soliloquy in Act II Scene 2, is here echoing a line that the audience will have remembered.

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– acknowledges Romeo's increasing maturity. Now, Romeo too can make sense of his experience in a rational prose. He is himself: that is, he knows himself as a Renaissance gentleman should. Most significantly, he is no longer in 'drivelling love', but in the grip of a requited passion.

Enter Nurse and her man, Peter
When the Nurse arrives, she is on an errand from Juliet: namely, to find Romeo and learn from him where their assignation will take place. Upon encountering Mercutio, the Nurse finds herself physically waylaid.

Act II Scene 4 is the scene in which Mercutio and the Nurse are united in expressing their realistic/anti-romantic view of the relations between men and women. For such an early hour of the morning after the feast, Mercutio is in good form and high spirits; he pretends to mistake the Nurse first for a ship ("A sail, a sail!") and then for a prostitute ("A bawd, a bawd, a bawd!") Here, the exchanges between them –

> MERCUTIO: For the bawdy hand of the dial is upon the prick of noon.
> NURSE: Out upon you! What a man are you!

– show how alike they are. From the Nurse, his salacious metaphor – referring to manual stimulation – excites only a disingenuous prudishness; her ready understanding of this extended metaphor reveals that her mind runs in the same direction. At this moment, the stage business may be graphic: in many productions, the Mercutio-actor puts his arms around Angelica, takes her hand and places it on his 'noon'. How the Nurse-actress reacts to this assault is important: as she withdraws her hand and adjusts her voluminous dress, she should look flustered, but flattered. Only after Mercutio's impudent exit ("Farewell, ancient lady") does she turn to Romeo. Her question –

> I pray you, sir, what saucy merchant was this that was so full of his ropery?

– sounds indignant, but at the same time resounds with an admiration of Mercutio's sauciness: 'Now, afore God, I am so vexed that every part about me quivers.' From this scene, it should be apparent that Romeo's kinsman and Juliet's confidante share and enjoy their realistic attitudes to sexual love. Here, again, is that perspective in which Romeo and Juliet's love is to be viewed: as Spencer puts it, "the mutual passion of Romeo and Juliet is surrounded by the mature bawdry of the other characters." Indeed, the Nurse's mock-indignation – "Scurvy knave! I am none of his flirt-gills. I am none of his skains-mates"[9] – suggests on the contrary that she wishes she was: that is, that she was not 'ancient', but young again and able to enjoy a knave's company.

The Nurse – who is also Friar Laurence's counterpart – has Juliet's best interests at heart; indeed, her vivid memories of the time when she was as nubile as Juliet seems to fire her interest in Juliet's coming of age.[10] According to the *Dramatis Personae*, the Nurse, once Juliet's wet-nurse, has become 'her foster-mother'; in this role, she warns Romeo that he must not leave her post-pubescent charge 'in a fool's paradise'; specifically, she warns him that he had better not be two-timing Juliet nor be leading her on. A further measure of the Nurse's integrity where Juliet is concerned is that she will not accept a penny ("Not a penny") for her pains as a go-between.

[9] Such Elizabethan colloquialisms do not trip off the modern tongue; it is difficult even to furnish a literal translation. The Nurse means that Mercutio ought not to be talking to her in that disrespectful way because she is neither one of the girls with whom he flirts ('flirt-gills') nor one of the lads with whom he goes around Verona, flicking his knife ('skains-mates').
[10] Just how old [= 'ancient'] is the Nurse? In Act I Scene 3, we learned both that her late daughter was Juliet's age and that Lady Capulet has not yet reached the age of 30. Such deductions do not mean that Angelica is of a similar age; it is quite conceivable that, fourteen years after Susan's birth, she is aged between 40 and 50 – which, in modern productions, is the age-range of the actresses who play her.

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It is already clear that Romeo and Juliet's relationship must be an undercover operation; they must meet and marry in secrecy. First, Romeo arranges a clandestine wedding that afternoon at Friar Laurence's cell. Second, he comes up with a daring plan for the wedding night: if the Nurse hides 'behind the abbey wall', then Romeo's agent ('my man') will bring her a rope-ladder ('a tackled stair') up which he can then climb to Juliet's balcony 'in the secret night' and down which he can effect his escape in the morning. From the outset, Romeo and Juliet's love-affair is a cloak-and-dagger affair, freighted with all sorts of danger.

ACT II Scene 5

At the start of this scene, Juliet is waiting for the Nurse (her agent, her go-between) to return from Romeo with the directions for their marital rendezvous. Because the Nurse has been detained for 'three long hours', Juliet is in an impatient mood: "The clock struck nine when I did send the Nurse". The classic measure of her impatience is that her time seems to pass with an unusual slowness: "In half an hour she promised to return." She expresses her frustration in iambic pentameters which invite her to drum nervously with her fingers.

Juliet cannot wait to go through the rites of marriage with Romeo. Because she is frustrated by the slightest delay, she makes unjustified criticisms of the Nurse's lateness: if she had 'warm youthful blood', then – says Juliet – the Nurse would not take so long. At this moment, Shakespeare so arranges things that they are ironic at the expense of Juliet's adolescent passion:

> Unwieldy, slow, heavy and pale as lead.
> *Enter Nurse and Peter*
> O God, she comes! O honey Nurse, what news?

While the Nurse was late, she was 'unwieldy, slow, heavy'; as soon as she arrives, she is no longer an object of abuse, but a 'honey'. In her frantic love for Romeo, Juliet appears comically inconsistent.

Having just been manhandled by Mercutio and physically reminded of her warmer-blooded days, the Nurse has returned to the Capulet house in a 'vexed' condition: to Juliet, her face looks 'sad' and 'sour'. Most likely, she still 'quivers' from the close attentions of that impudent rogue and is in a state of breathless excitement: "Do you not see that I am out of breath?" Whatever the case, she is in a contrary/funny mood and chides her mistress for being so desperate for 'news' from her young man. Rather than relay at once what arrangements have been made for the tryst with Romeo, she prattles on inconsequentially, whirling off at tangents: "Romeo? Not he."/"Lord, how my head aches!"/"Where is your mother?" Is she merely preoccupied with her own sensations or concerned to tease her inexperienced mistress? Whatever the case, the dramatic effect of her procrastinations is to highlight Juliet's excitement. Dramatically, her delaying tactics (wilful or otherwise) point up Juliet's eagerness to find out what sexual love is like.

From Act I Scene 3, we know that the Nurse identifies closely with Juliet's inflamed state and is envisaging her wedding night in indecent detail; in this scene, Shakespeare develops that relationship with Juliet. It makes most sense to argue that the Nurse here tantalises her 'sweetest lady' in order lovingly to observe her reactions: that she procrastinates primarily because she delights in seeing Juliet in the throes of adolescent passion. In the end, the Nurse faithfully relays Romeo's plan to Juliet and enjoys watching 'the wanton blood' rush into her cheeks. Indeed, Shakespeare confirms that she takes a vicarious delight in Juliet's very existence:

> I am the drudge, and toil in your delight.
> But you shall bear the burden soon at night.

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In spite of her prurient attitude to Juliet's imminent loss of virginity, the Nurse is genuinely pleased for her. She takes personal pleasure in the idea that Juliet will soon 'bear the burden' of a young man's body on top of her.

At the same time as Juliet's final cry – 'Hie to high fortune!' – anticipates the high point of her fortunes, it sounds an ironic and tragic note of elation.

ACT II Scene 6

Late that afternoon/that evening, Juliet ("Good even to my ghostly confessor") rushes to Friar Laurence's cell on the pretext that she wishes to 'be shrived': that is, confess her sins to the priest. This scene – in which Romeo and Juliet meet at Friar Laurence's cell both to receive confession and be married – is remarkable for its proleptic ironies: sadly, the heavens do not 'smile' upon the 'holy act' of matrimony that the Friar performs between them.

In his essay entitled *The School of Love*, Donald A. Stauffer argues that ***Romeo and Juliet*** teaches one lesson: "The actual ethical energy of the drama resides in its realization of the purity and intensity of ideal love." In this context, Romeo's words to Friar Laurence –

> But come what sorrow can,
> It cannot countervail the exchange of joy
> That one short minute gives me in her sight

– define the value by which all other values in the play are judged. On the one hand, it may be argued that the 'sorrow' which comes to Romeo and Juliet more than cancels out ('countervails') the 'exchange of joy that one short minute' with Juliet brings to Romeo, that 'love-devouring death' does devour Romeo and Juliet's love and that (in the Friar's ominous words) 'these violent delights have violent ends'. On the other hand, we may take Romeo simply at his word: that no 'sorrow' – not even their twin suicides – is superior in his scale of values to the 'joy' that seeing Juliet for 'one short minute' brings.

Enter Juliet somewhat fast. She embraces Romeo.

Upon having Juliet once again within his 'sight', Romeo speaks a romantic poetry. His mellifluous verse –

> let rich music's tongue
> Unfold the imagined happiness that both
> Receive in either by this dear encounter

– rings with a tragic irony: in the end, we are left merely to imagine what 'happiness' Romeo and Juliet could have enjoyed. Upon meeting Romeo again, Juliet –

> But my true love is grown to such excess
> I cannot sum up sum of half my wealth

– confirms that she too has learned to assay the value of 'true love'. Like Romeo's, Juliet's words express a "realization of the purity and intensity of ideal love" (Stauffer). Although there is no stage-direction to this effect, a Director might choose at this juncture to put on stage a dumb-show in which the Friar is seen to wed them: 'incorporate two in one'.

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ACT III Scene 1

Although ***Romeo and Juliet*** is an early tragedy, Shakespeare's craftsmanship is skilful. At the start of Act III, Romeo and Juliet are proceeding towards 'high fortune'; at this precise moment, the action of the play takes a turn which diverts the course of their true love forever. Tragically, their fortunes will attain no greater height; at the zenith, their stars cross.

Benvolio comments that Verona is in the middle of a long, 'hot' summer: in the veins of all Italians, 'the mad blood' is 'stirring'. During July, temperatures have risen to the point where the young men of the town are in the mood for a fight: in particular, the humid weather has added a degree of irascibility to the running battle between the Montagues and the Capulets.

Mercutio – 'a gentleman', remember, 'that loves to hear himself talk' – asserts that Benvolio (whose name suggests otherwise) is a quarrelsome fellow: "thou art as hot a Jack as any in Italy." He alleges that, under these 'moody' conditions, Benvolio will 'quarrel with a man for cracking nuts' [= hazel nuts] for 'no other reason' than that he himself has 'hazel eyes'; seeing such nuts cracked, he takes automatic offence. With a chilling irony, Mercutio predicts that, under these sultry conditions, a man may pick a quarrel for a ridiculous reason.

Mercutio then behaves in a ridiculous manner: as soon as Tybalt enters, he taunts him: "I will not budge for no man's pleasure, I". Tybalt is looking for a fight, but not with Mercutio; rather, he is in search of Romeo – who enters at this inopportune moment. Romeo, who has been married to Juliet for only an hour, remains admirably unaffected by the heat of this moment: "Villain am I none." His ironic refusal to brawl –

> And so good Capulet, which name I tender
> As dearly as my own, be satisfied

– does him mature credit, revealing his pacifist tendency. By sharp contrast, it is Mercutio who is spoiling for a fight and who then fights Romeo's battle for him. His challenge to Tybalt – "Come, sir, your *passado*" – rings with his old contempt for Tybalt's pedantic interest in the art of swordsmanship: recklessly, Mercutio risks his life merely in order to make an academic point.

Romeo tries to act as a peace-maker. It is when he intercedes as a law-abiding citizen that Tybalt has the chance to stab Mercutio to death: *Tybalt under Romeo's arm thrusts Mercutio*. It is as Mercutio is dying that he vents the first of his three curses upon the Montague-Capulet feud: "A plague a' both your houses". In doing so, he encapsulates the tragic situation in which Romeo and Juliet find themselves; it is purely and simply because of this long-standing quarrel that their innocent love is doomed.

Mercutio dies being both ironical at Death's expense ("Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man") and critical of the rival houses ("A plague a' both your houses"). Mercutio 'scorns the earth', but he also scorns the blood-feud without which Romeo and Juliet could have lived happily ever after.

To atone for Mercutio's death – which occurred both on his behalf and as a result of his intervention – Romeo does then pick a fight with 'the furious Tybalt'. The tragic series of events is well underway: *They fight. Tybalt falls*. With Tybalt's death, Romeo ("O, I am Fortune's fool") is doomed to an exiled existence. Even though he had turned his back on the first fight, tried to walk away from the trouble, Fate/Fortune has made a fool of him. Events – in the form of this 'fatal brawl' – have conspired against him.

In the true spirit of the Veronese vendetta, Lady Capulet insists that Prince Escalus exact retribution on Romeo Montague for this 'bloody fray':

> Prince, as thou art true,
> For blood of ours shed blood of Montague.

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She maintains the high temperature of the moment by demanding an eye for an eye. Primitive in her fashion, she expects 'blood' for 'blood': for his part in 'this black strife', she demands that Romeo be put to death. Put in this embarrassing political position, Prince Escalus has no choice but to respond to her blood-curdling cries for vengeance. He comes up with a compromise solution, banishing Romeo from Verona on pain of death. At a sword-stroke, the 'high fortune' of Romeo and Juliet has plummeted to the darkest depths – as at 'the bottom of a tomb'.

ACT III Scene 2

At the start of this scene, Juliet delivers a soliloquy in which she once more expresses her adolescent impatience. Although she speaks an impassioned verse, her thirty-line soliloquy –

> Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds,
> Towards Phoebus' lodging

– underlines what a level-headed character/what a sensible girl she is. Emotional though this speech is, it exhibits her rational self-awareness: namely, that her impatience for the night on which she will consummate her marriage is perverse. She knows that she is wantonly wishing away the day so that the 'love-performing night' will come more quickly. Even her self-justification – "if love be blind, it best agrees with night" – carries with it a prudent recognition that her love for Romeo involves a leap of blind faith.

Juliet's soliloquy – in some respects, her counterpart to Romeo's "What light ...?" speech in Act II Scene 2 – is structured by a series of invocations to the night ('civil night', 'gentle night', 'loving, black-browed night') in which she must conduct her affair. There are dramatic ironies at Juliet's expense. First: unknown to her, her 'high fortune' – with the fateful events of Act III Scene 1 – has dived to the black depths of night; it is as if this 'sober-suited matron, all in black' is midwife to the sudden reversal of her fortune. Second: her wishing away of her life, so that night ('death') will come more quickly, anticipates her actual fate.

Furthermore, Juliet is preparing herself psychologically for the loss of her virginity. Her reference to her 'unmanned' blood involves an epithet transferred from her flesh to her blood; by means of hypallage, Shakespeare reminds us that Romeo and Juliet, though they have been married, have not yet slept together. The proleptic irony which attends her longing for this big moment –

> Come, gentle night. Come, loving, black-browed night,
> Give me my Romeo, and when I shall die,
> Take him and cut him out in little stars

– is painfully acute. It is ironic that this star-crossed lover should see Romeo's death and her own in such close conjunction; here, she is to be heard wishing both their lives away with a tragic foresight. Juliet cannot wait to possess and be possessed sexually:

> O I have bought the mansion of a love,
> But not possessed it; and though I am sold,
> Not yet enjoyed.

Although this blank verse portrays the 'tedious' wait of an 'impatient child', it also presents us with a young woman who is making a supreme effort to control her powerful emotions; it dramatises Juliet's mature struggle to come to terms with adult experience. Throughout this soliloquy, Juliet retains her self-possession: on the evidence of such self-analysis, she is no silly female.

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Throughout the play, Juliet is a young woman with conflicting emotions in her bosom. In this scene, the Nurse – her mentor – adds to her anguish by her characteristic failure to express herself with calm control. Here, Angelica's careless use of the third person ("He's dead") creates a situation in which the two talk at cross-purposes; her non-specific use of pronoun throws Juliet's emotions into an unnecessary turmoil, puts her again in the grip of strong feelings. Juliet's question –

> What storm is this that blows so contrary?

– is asked before she acquires a complete understanding of the recent developments: that Romeo (alive) has stabbed Tybalt dead. Ironically, her question asks about the tempestuous conditions in which she then finds herself. It is to this 'storm' of confusion that her epithets –

> Beautiful tyrant! Fiend angelical!
> Dove-feathered raven! Wolvish-ravening lamb!

– refer when she does finally understand what has happened. In the heat of this moment, Juliet's series of oxymorons illustrates vividly how divided her loyalties are. Romeo (her husband) has killed Tybalt (her cousin); in theory, she is torn between two violent extremes.

In this scene, Shakespeare supplies a reason why the Nurse talks too much: namely, that she is frequently tired and emotional/the worse for drink: "Give me some aqua vitae". It is under the influence of alcohol that she uses language loosely and casts sudden/wild aspersions on men's characters: "No faith, no honesty in men." Her inebriated feeling that all men are dishonest ('all dissemblers') culminates in a slight on Romeo's character: "Shame come to Romeo". Hearing her beloved husband maligned, Juliet comes quickly to her senses. She re-gathers her composure and discovers with a vengeance where her true loyalties lie. This sharp exchange –

> NURSE: Will you speak well of him that killed your cousin?
> JULIET: Shall I speak ill of him that is my husband?

– signifies that she has regained her sense of priorities. Suddenly, she knows again how to feel; she springs to Romeo's defence upon the stark realisation that, if she – his 'three-hours wife' – does not stand up for him, then no one will. She recovers a realistic grasp of the situation:

> My husband lives, that Tybalt would have slain;
> And Tybalt's dead, that would have slain my husband.

Endowed with a shrewd intellect, Juliet balances the two wrongs against each other and reaches a right/sound conclusion. In order to fix the fact in her head, Juliet needs to tell herself twice that 'Romeo is banishèd'. Having done so, she throws down the 'poor ropes' (which were to have made 'a highway' to her bed) and resigns herself dolefully to an unfulfilled life:

> I'll to my wedding bed,
> And death, not Romeo, take my maidenhead!

Gladly, the Nurse is not so despondent and regains a sense of purpose. She knows that Romeo is in hiding at Friar Laurence's cell and volunteers still to bring him to Juliet's bed-chamber that night. To this sudden promise, Juliet's imperatives –

> O, find him! Give this ring to my true knight
> And bid him come to take his last farewell

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– respond with delight. They support Stauffer's theory that Romeo and Juliet experience 'true' love: expressly, that they derive the 'ethical energy' for their schemes (eg. with the 'cords') from the 'purity and intensity' of their love for each other. What is more, Juliet's two lines complete a rhyme-scheme and ring with a tragic irony: that is, her 'true knight' will 'take his last farewell' from her not because he will go into exile, but because he will go to his death.

ACT III Scene 3

In Act III Scene 2, Shakespeare's aim was to illustrate the depth of Juliet's love; in Act III Scene 3, his aim is to illustrate the depth of Romeo's love. Whereas Juliet expressed her feelings with a degree of rational restraint, Romeo is hysterical and melodramatic. For instance, he exaggerates on a cosmic scale:

> There is no world without Verona walls,
> But purgatory, torture, hell itself.

Romeo's hell is not the geographical and theological hell of the medieval imagination, but an existentialist hell: for Romeo, 'hell' is wherever Juliet isn't. By this token, the 'Prince's doom' – that is, Romeo's banishment – is not an act of 'dear mercy', but a condemnation to eternal 'torture'/torment; by converse implication, 'Heaven' for Romeo is 'where Juliet lives'.

It is when Romeo is forced to contemplate his existence without Juliet that hysteria overwhelms him. To him, it seems grossly unfair 'every unworthy thing' can live with Juliet in the Veronese heaven whilst he, who loves her worthily, cannot:

> This may flies do, when I from this must fly.

His feeble pun on the noun 'flies'/the verb 'fly' (which he repeats three lines later) illustrates how histrionic his mood is. Such verbal gesturing confirms how immature he is/how inadequate his powers are to deal with the predicament in which he finds himself. He has his own particular troubles in coming to terms with the fact that he has been 'banishèd', a clumsy adjective which he repeats a tiresome total of six times. No abstract philosophy ("Hang up philosophy!") can compensate him for the loss of Juliet's concrete charms. Under this pressure, he loses patience with their 'ghostly confessor' and rudely tells him to 'talk no more'. In this mood, Romeo ("Thou canst not speak of that thou dost not feel") is not inclined to listen to any lectures from celibate priests.

Whilst Friar Laurence tries and fails to control Romeo, the stage-direction *Knock* is heard four times – after which the Nurse makes her entrance: "I come from Lady Juliet." In front of the Nurse, Romeo indulges in more histrionics: *He offers to stab himself and the Nurse snatches the dagger away*. At once, Friar Laurence embarks upon a fifty-line tirade against such a 'desperate' remedy: "Art thou a man?" He reminds Romeo that such over-emotional and irrational acts reduce him to the level of an animal: that he is displaying 'the unreasonable fury of a beast'. In no uncertain terms, he tells Romeo to count his 'pack of blessings':

> What, rouse thee, man! Thy Juliet is alive,
> For whose dear sake thou wast but lately dead.

Friar Laurence tries to shame Romeo into a more adult response to his adversity: he should be grateful that Juliet 'is alive', stop acting so childishly and man up. The Friar's homely message is that, whilst there is life, there is hope; consequently, Romeo should stop behaving like a spoiled brat ('like a misbehavèd and sullen wench') and be more sanguine. Certainly, Romeo needs to pull himself together; in extremities, in dire straits, such a hysterical over-reaction is futile. On the other hand, Friar Laurence envisages a resolution to Romeo's

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predicament which is altogether too easy and too rosy: "Beg pardon of the Prince …" Although he means well, the Friar paints an optimistic scenario for Romeo ("How well my comfort is revived by this!") which never materialises. The rest of the play, beginning with the very next scene, goes only to show how inadequate such optimism is.

ACT III Scene 4

In this scene, the plot sets up another obstacle to Romeo and Juliet's chances of living happily ever after. The scene takes the form of a dialogue between Old Capulet and Count Paris (seen last in Act I Scene 2) in which Capulet arranges Juliet's marriage to Paris and sets an imminent date: "A' Thursday".

From Capulet's point of view, 'things have fallen out … unluckily' in that Tybalt's death has distracted the Capulet family from its eager intention to marry off its only daughter. Speaking on a Monday, Capulet is confident that it will take only one word from him to set the Paris match back on course for Thursday … Of course, Capulet, by promising his daughter's hand so confidently, exhibits that degree of hubris which invites a tragic nemesis. Accordingly, there is a great deal of dramatic irony at his expense: little does he know that Juliet will not 'be ruled in all respects' by him; even less does he know that Juliet cannot 'be married to this noble earl' because she would then be committing bigamy.

Wrong as they are, Capulet's statements show how determined he is to maintain a tyrannical rule over his daughter. In its turn, his mistaken assumption that he commands the situation ("A' Thursday be it, then") illustrates how over-optimistic Friar Laurence's plan is: namely, that Romeo should hide in Mantua until the storm has blown over and then return coolly to claim his bride. Friar Laurence's plan is naive in that it overlooks the political realities of Veronese life – brashly expressed in this scene – which are likely to thwart it.

ACT III Scene 5

At the start of this scene, Romeo and Juliet share a second duet; on this occasion, it is an aubade. As planned, Romeo has come secretly to Juliet in the middle of the night and consummated their marriage; on the morning after their first night of passion, Romeo and Juliet appear at her balcony/her chamber-window and say the lines of this traditional morning song.

Unusually, it is Juliet who refuses to believe that the dawn has not arrived: previously, she had behaved in a rational and realistic manner; now that she is no longer a virgin, she casts caution to the morning breeze and speaks without common sense. Her firm statement –

> It is not yet near day.
> It was the nightingale, and not the lark,
> That pierced the fearful hollow of thine ear

– refuses to face the facts of their situation and indicates that her emotion has overwhelmed her reason. Here, she cannot come to terms with a parting which is no longer 'sweet sorrow'. On this occasion, Romeo – previously irrational and romantic – behaves more sensibly. He is the more realistic and clearer-sighted of the pair. His firm reply –

> No nightingale. Look, love, what envious steaks
> Do lace the severing clouds in yonder East

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– is phrased in the poetic language that an aubade requires, but is expressive of an unpoetic realism. His plain statement – "I must be gone and live, or stay and die" – proves that he is wide-awake to the stark alternatives before him. Now that he has grown into a man, he no longer disguises the danger of his position.

This time, Juliet's love is blind to the perilous circumstances. She comes up with the fantastic idea that the sun is actually a meteor specially designed to guide her new husband to the safety of exile in Mantua. Romeo's response is interesting and important:

> I am content, so thou wilt have it so.

With a selfless grace, he is prepared to say, "All right, have it your own way, my darling". On Romeo's part, this gesture reveals the kind of faith on which true love is based. He will do anything to please her; he will swear that black is white and – as here – that day is night. Ironically, he welcomes death ("Come, death, and welcome!") if that is what Juliet wants.

It is only when Romeo illustrates his options so dramatically that Juliet comes to her senses again. Her change of mind – "Hie hence, be gone, way" – records her own awakening after the romantic night to the 'harsh' reality of the Veronese day. She rejects poetic orthodoxy and admits that their parting, previously a 'sweet sorrow', is now a necessary division. Now, it is expedient that they part: in this scenario, the lark – previously 'the herald of the morn' – becomes the villain of the piece/peace. Henceforth, Romeo and Juliet will enjoy no peace except for the peace that comes with their deaths; as predicted, theirs is a violent delight that will come to a violent end. With the break of daylight, Romeo and Juliet's woes become darker …

Juliet's statement – "Then, window, let day in, and let life out" – illustrates plainly that Romeo is life itself to her. After Romeo has leapt down from her bedroom balcony, Juliet has a premonition:

> O God, I have an ill-divining soul!
> Methinks I see thee, now thou art so low,
> As one dead in the bottom of a tomb.

From this vantage-point, he appears to her as if he is already dead. Here, then, is another proleptic irony: rightly, her soul has divined ill, for she will never again see him alive ... Juliet appears to believe that 'Fortune, Fortune' – in the form of the family feud – is responsible for their plight. One standard interpretation of the play is that Fate/'Fortune', though it is supposedly 'fickle', consistently operates against Romeo and Juliet; it is for this reason that they are styled 'a pair of star-crossed lovers'. Another interpretation is that the generation gap is responsible for 'their death-marked love'/their tragedy: in particular, that the Capulets misunderstand and mistreat their daughter. This reading is based upon the second half of this scene …

For instance, the following exchanges between Lady Capulet and Juliet show that the mother ('That same villain Romeo') completely misunderstands her daughter's feelings. But it must be said that Lady Capulet's attitude is determined not so much by maternal insensitivity ('the traitor murderer') as by deep implication in the feud. Lady Capulet is out of sympathy with her daughter, not because she is an unfeeling mother, but because she bears a bitter grudge against Romeo's family. It is because of this long-running saga, this chronic vendetta, that Juliet tailors her words. She loads her sentences with ambiguity: first, she cannot bear to hear Romeo 'named and cannot come to him'; secondly, she expresses her refusal to marry Paris in a way that – unknown to her mother – flatters Romeo. Her ambiguous statement –

> I will not marry yet; and when I do, I swear
> It shall be Romeo, whom you know I hate,
> Rather than Paris

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– parries her mother's proposal of Paris by means of a dramatic irony: we know, whereas Lady Capulet does not, that Juliet does not exactly 'hate' Romeo! Lady Capulet struggles with her daughter's recalcitrance, expressing her exasperation in an iambic pentameter – "I would the fool were married to her grave!" – that reverberates with a proleptic irony.

On the other hand, Old Capulet's attitude to his stubborn daughter is far more strident. He attacks her for being so recalcitrant with a series of outbursts in which he accuses her of ingratitude: "Doth she not give us thanks?" Capulet is assertive and dogmatic; he asserts dogmatically that she is an ungrateful child who should be only too glad to accept 'so worthy a gentleman' [as Paris].

Capulet is not prepared to listen to Juliet's arguments against an arranged marriage. Instead of listening sympathetically to her, he heaps a series of insults upon her head:

> Out, you green-sickness carrion! Out you baggage!
> You tallow-face!

To Capulet, Juliet is not a feeling young girl, but a 'disobedient wench'. He rants and raves at her as if she were not entitled to her own opinion. When the Nurse intervenes on Juliet's behalf, he vituperates against her too: "Smatter with your gossips, go!" Capulet is a cantankerous old man. He is in such a querulous mood, in such an ill temper, that he cannot stop piling insults upon Juliet's head: 'a wretched puling fool' and 'a whining mammet'. He is so irate that he tells her never to darken his door again:

> Graze where you will, you shall not house with me.

He disowns his own daughter to a beggar's death on the streets simply because she will not let him have his own way. Capulet is without compassion; he does not care that this marriage of convenience is inconvenient to her. After this vituperative outburst, Juliet's response is understandably forlorn. Her rhetorical question –

> Is there no pity sitting in the clouds
> That sees into the bottom of my grief?

– suggests again that Fate [= something 'sitting in the clouds'] is primarily responsible for her piteous predicament. Juliet's plea that her bridal bed be made 'in that dim monument where Tybalt lies' contains a tragic irony, but fails to soften Lady Capulet's hard heart: "Talk not to me, for I'll not speak a word". Lady Capulet is unsympathetic, not because she is concerned with the Paris match, but because she is obsessed with the blood feud. Beside the 'ancient grudge', her daughter's happiness is of secondary importance.

It is in these dire straits that Juliet turns once again to her Nurse for reassurance and advice: "Comfort me, counsel me". Unfortunately, the Nurse lets Juliet down: hitherto her trusted confidante, the Nurse can now offer her only cold comfort and feebly advises her to respect her parents' wishes. The Nurse's will fails her; rather than support her foster-daughter, she denigrates Romeo (a 'dishclout') and urges on her a pragmatic approach to the 'second match'… Juliet has too noble a nature to accept such pragmatism. Upon the Nurse's exit, the tragic die is cast. Left to her own devices, Juliet speaks a brief soliloquy in which she attributes her predicament to God's original punishment of Eve for being attracted to and tempted by the fiend-like serpent:

> Ancient damnation! O most wicked fiend!

Realising that she can no longer count on the Nurse, she quickly falls back on her own resources: 'Go, counsellor!' [= Fine counsellor you are!] She scoffs at the Nurse and then

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runs off to Friar Laurence's cell to make her own arrangements for her future. Deserted, but heroic, she resolves to do the best that she can for herself.

Donald A. Stauffer concludes that "this play is a tragedy [but] may fail as serious tragedy because Shakespeare blurs the focus and never makes up his mind entirely as to who is being punished, and for what reason". He means that Shakespeare does not indicate with any clarity whom he blames for the tragedy. Is it Fate? Is it the tyrannical and unsympathetic Capulets? Is it the Nurse? In this scene alone, all three of these possibilities are aired; in other scenes, Romeo (for his impulsiveness) and Friar Laurence (for his indecisiveness) suggest themselves.

* * * * * * * * * *

ACT IV Scene 1

At the start of this scene, Friar Laurence must pretend to Count Paris that there is no impediment to his arranged marriage. Especially after Juliet arrives, the dramatic irony at Paris' expense is sharp: he does not know, whereas Friar Laurence and Juliet do, that her marriage to him would be bigamy. In addition, Paris' single statement – "For Venus smiles not in a house of tears" – inadvertently sums up the situation in the play: between the House of Montague and the House of Capulet, there is such 'black strife' that Venus cannot smile in either of them. Love cannot prosper under their roofs; there is a 'plague' on both their houses.

Once Paris has left, Juliet can confide in Friar Laurence. Since the Nurse has let her down, Romeo's confidant/mentor must become hers too; she therefore tells him that she is in a state of despair: "Past hope, past cure, past help!" Forever optimistic, Friar Laurence spies 'a kind of hope'. As a student of homeopathic medicine, he has access to a vial of 'distilling liquor' which can somehow induce in a patient the appearance of a corpse; like a conjuror, he produces this magic vial out of his cloak. He reassures both Juliet (and the audience) that, if she drinks this magic potion, it will put her into 'a cold and drowsy humour' which will not cause death, but simulate it: "No warmth, no breath, shall testify thou livest."

The cunning plan – set out by the Friar in another speech of thirty lines – is that Juliet will continue 'in this borrowed likeness of shrunk death' for forty-two hours. The idea is that, by the time she regains consciousness, her parents will have committed her living body to the family vault where Romeo will await her. Romeo himself will be informed of this fantastic ruse by Friar Laurence's letters:

> I'll send a friar with speed
> To Mantua, with my letters to thy lord.

The tragedy of Romeo and Juliet results from the fact that these vital letters never get there. The family feud – which means that Romeo and Juliet must resort to a complex network of go-betweens – finally and tragically breaks down. It is in Act V Scene 3 that this break-down occurs.

ACT IV Scene 2

At the start of this scene, Old Capulet is speaking to Lady Capulet and the Nurse about Juliet's disobedient behaviour: "A peevish self-willed harlotry it is." Because his daughter has denied him his own way, he remains in a mood of rancorous impatience and seems eager to consign her to a brothel.

When she returns from Friar Laurence's cell, Juliet disarms her father's greeting – "How now, my headstrong! Where have you been gadding?" – with an extravagant display of contrition. In order to implement the first part of the Friar's plan, it is necessary that she should lie to

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her parents through her teeth: "Henceforward I am ever ruled by you." Daughterly duty rates low in her scale of values: in her desire to live happily-ever-after with Romeo, she resorts readily to an outright deception of her selfish father and mother.

Dramatic irony occurs at Capulet and Lady Capulet's expense: we know, whereas they do not, that Juliet's plausible account of her actions is a complete and utter fiction. She places upon her dealings with Friar Laurence a resourceful construction that deceives her parents into thinking that 'all things shall be well': that is, that her marriage to Paris will proceed according to their plan. As a result, Capulet moves the wedding forward to the following day (Wednesday) and expresses a hubristic confidence in the immediate future: "My heart is wondrous light." We know, whereas he does not, that Juliet remains the 'same wayward girl': that is, an unreconstructed romantic in whose mythology Romeo reigns supreme.

ACT IV Scene 3

At the end of Act III Scene 5, Juliet had felt abandoned by the Nurse whose expedient advice – "I think it best you married with the County" – was not what she wanted to hear. In Juliet's hour of dire need, the Nurse had comforted her 'marvellous much': that is, not at all. As an immediate consequence, Juliet can no longer confide in the Nurse and must proceed alone with her covert operation. The irony at her expense is that she *does* 'have need of many orisons [= prayers] to move the heavens to smile' upon her star-crossed state: not for the first time, she speaks more truly than she knows.

At the very end of the previous scene, Capulet decided suddenly to bring forward the ceremony by one day. It is in this scene that Juliet – in advance of a Wednesday wedding – hastens to take Friar Laurence's potion. After dismissing the Nurse, she embarks on a long soliloquy in which she voices her sensible misgivings about the far-fetched plan. Shakespeare's blank verse is functional in depicting an agonised mind in the act of thinking. Over the options that still remain open to her, Juliet's thoughts rove to and fro:

> What if this mixture does not work at all?
> Shall I be married then tomorrow morning?
> No, no! This shall forbid it. Lie thou there.
> *She lays down a knife*

Left to her own devices, Juliet is brave. Prudently, she rehearses the risks that she is taking: has the Friar tricked her? will she be suffocated ('stifled in the vault')? or will she awake only to find that she is still in a 'horrible'/'loathsome' nightmare? Only after forty lines of ghastly imaginings does she overcome her 'hideous fears'. Although she has intimations of her imminent mortality, Juliet does not panic. This juxtaposition –

> Romeo, Romeo, Romeo.
> Here's drink. I drink to thee.
> *She falls upon her bed within the curtains*

– illustrates the balance of the ethical forces in the play: ultimately, it is for the sake of 'Romeo' that she resolves to take the sedative drink and risk her life. So violent is her delight in Romeo that it could bring her to a sticky end: in this do-or-die context, it is ominous that she is also in possession of a knife …

ACT IV Scene 4

On the following morning, hectic and lavish provisions are being made for Paris and Juliet's wedding. For her part, Lady Capulet – 'Hold, take these keys and fetch more spices' – is keen that no expense should be spared; at once, Capulet's injunction to the Nurse – "Look to the baked meats, good Angelica" – echoes this concern.

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In this scene, the Capulet household is in a state of excited anticipation. The stage-directions – *Enter three or four Servingmen with spits and logs and baskets* and *Music plays* – imply how busy and festive the mood is. Such a mood, of course, is ironic: we know, whereas Capulet ("Go waken Juliet") does not, that the Nurse will struggle to 'waken Juliet'.

ACT IV Scene 5

Shakespeare permits his audience to view this scene through the window of its superior awareness. The action takes place within the framework provided by the audience's knowledge (which the Capulets do not share) that Juliet, though she sleeps deeply, is not dead.

Dramatic irony occurs first at the Nurse's expense. We know, whereas she does not, that her prurient wish (that Paris allow Juliet to 'rest but little' on their wedding night) will not be granted. What is more, we know, whereas she does not, that her lady is not dead and that her hysterical expression of grief ("O weraday that ever I was born!") is premature; premature too are the other expressions of grief ('O lamentable day!', 'O heavy day!') which the Nurse utters. Although these utterances bear the accents of tragedy, the tragedy has not yet taken place. Consequently, Capulet's epitaph –

> Death lies on her like an untimely frost
> Upon the sweetest flower of all the field

– rings with a proleptic irony. It illustrates beautifully the tragedy of Juliet's untimely death, but before the event has taken place. Similarly, Capulet's other epitaph –

> There she lies,
> Flower as she was, deflowered by him

– accurately describes the eventual tragedy: namely, that the flower of Juliet's youth – if not of her maidenhead – is plucked by Death. In Elizabethan times, there was a race against time: frequently, a young woman's virginity would die with her; she would be 'deflowered' by Death before she had been 'deflowered' by a man. Hence, the picture of Death is as both a Grim Reaper and a Grim Rapist.

In this scene, the Capulets do a very great deal of wailing. Their laments are numerous and repetitive:

> LADY CAPULET Accursed, unhappy, wretched, hateful day!
>
> NURSE O woeful, woeful, woeful day!
>
> PARIS Beguiled, divorcèd, wrongèd, spited, slain!
>
> CAPULET Despised, distressèd, hated, martyred, killed!

Such articulations of grief amplify the perception of a Black Wednesday: "Never was seen so black a day as this." Because he knows that this day is not 'black', that Juliet is merely in limbo, Friar Laurence listens to these high-pitched wailings with an air of detachment, but must nevertheless be ready to comfort the Capulets in their apparent bereavement. Because he holds over the distraught parents an advantage that he cannot disclose, the Friar, the very soul of integrity, finds himself here having to deliver an utterly disingenuous speech. He ministers to the Capulets in a pious tone which, owing to the comprehensive deception that he is practising upon them, lacks all sincerity. Only in theory does he celebrate Juliet's 'promotion' to glory:

> And weep ye now, seeing she is advanced

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Above the clouds, as high as heaven itself?

Because he is not merely implicated in the plot, but the author of it, he resorts to preaching an academic sermon on the consolations of such a premature death; he says what a priest would say – "Stick your rosemary on this fair corse" – if a child-bride had just died. It is a measure of the Friar's respect for Romeo and Juliet that he so readily engages in intrigue and resorts to this subterfuge on their behalf. His willing complicity in such a gross deception acts as an objective correlative by which the value of 'their death-marked love' [= the power of their passion, the violence of their delight] can be assayed.

At the same time, there are ironies at Friar Laurence's own expense. First, his euphemism wrongly predicts that there is some pity for Juliet sitting 'above the clouds'. Second, his sententious couplet –

She's not well married that lives married long,
But she's best married that dies married young

– rightly pronounces a death-sentence on Romeo and Juliet's marriage. Romantic love such as theirs never dies simply because they die before the passage of time has any chance to affect it: because they 'die married young', their love for each other can never fade away. How many grandchildren had Romeo and Juliet? It's a question that few ever think to ask.

Equally ironic, Capulet's line – "Our bridal flowers serve for a buried corse" – anticipates the situation at the end of the play. The concluding stage-direction – *Exeunt all except the Nurse, casting rosemary on her and shutting the curtains* – serves to consolidate this tableau. Here, the Nurse obeys the Friar's instruction: with a tragic prescience, she ensures that the fragrant herb 'rosemary' – for remembrance – is strewn over Juliet's corpse.

The subsequent interlude with the Musicians presents a problem: now that Juliet is 'dead', they are redundant. Consequently, we can assume that Shakespeare uses them simply to create a period of light relief between the scenes in which Juliet feigns suicide and commits suicide.

* * * * * * * * * *

ACT V Scene 1

Proleptic irony recurs: at the start of this scene, Romeo's dreams 'presage some joyful news at hand'. Very ironically, Romeo dreams that his lady 'came and found' him dead, but promptly 'revived' him with the kiss of life: as a matter of tragic fact, the action of the play proves him right – except that Juliet's kiss is unable to bring him back to life. In the final event, Romeo is not 'revived', but nevertheless dies her 'emperor'.

Romeo's servant Balthasar enters with 'news from Verona'. Significantly, he does not bring 'letters from the Friar', but instead reports that Juliet is dead:

Her body sleeps in Capel's monument,
And her immortal part with angels lives.

It is literally true that Juliet's body 'sleeps' in the Capulet crypt. Unfortunately and understandably, Balthasar is suffering under the misapprehension that Juliet has died and been laid to rest and he duly communicates this misinformation to his master. Balthasar has beaten Friar Laurence's messenger to Romeo's door with the fatal result that Romeo himself becomes a victim of Juliet's cunning practice against her family. Romeo's repeated question – "Hast thou no letters to me from the Friar?" – signals that the complicated system of go-betweens has broken down and prepares us for the tragic outcome.

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Upon Balthasar's exit, Romeo announces his intention to enlist the aid of a cadaverous Apothecary and take his own life. Passion lends him power: from this mediaeval pharmacist, he procures 'a dram of poison' and sets off for Juliet's grave. It is his poetic intention there to poison himself so that he can then lie beside her, thereby consummating their love in death. Romeo's couplet –

> Come, cordial and not poison, go with me
> To Juliet's grave. For there must I use thee

– tragically prescribes what will happen next. On the one hand, it is a 'rash' and 'unadvised' decision that Romeo has taken, a 'sudden' resolution that implies an immaturity of character; on the other hand, he takes it only because Fate has thwarted Friar Laurence's best efforts to inform him of the complicated plan.

ACT V Scene 2

"It may be said that the catastrophe of the action depends upon a mere accident which has no connexion with any other character or event within the play [and that] this chance action directly produces the tragic conclusion." According to T. J. B. Spencer, Fate [= an isolated 'accident'] is responsible for the 'death-marked love' of Romeo and Juliet.

Act V Scene 2 illustrates precisely what he means. We view this scene – as we viewed the last two scenes – through the window of our knowledge that Juliet is not dead; worse, however, is our additional knowledge that Romeo believes that she is. The exchanges of this scene between Friar Laurence and his emissary Friar John illustrate the very dangers that attend the use of such emissaries/such go-betweens. Here, we learn to our horror that Friar John – who was entrusted with the letter explaining Friar Laurence's master-plan to Romeo – has failed to reach his destination. Friar Laurence's question – "What says Romeo?" – receives a blank answer; it turns out that Friar John, on his way to Mantua with the letter that explains all, had been forcibly detained 'in a house where the infectious pestilence did reign'. For fear that he might spread this plague, Friar John was quarantined and therefore unable to go between the two agents in this plot. In fact, he brings the crucial letter all the way back again to Verona: "here it is again". Here, Mercutio's dying curse (from Act III Scene 1) comes into literal effect: on 'both' the House of Montague and the House of Capulet, there is 'a plague'.

Friar Laurence's exclamation – "Unhappy fortune" – registers our own shock at this misadventure. On the one hand, it can be argued that Fate has operated against Romeo and Juliet: that it is by pure/sheer accident that their stars have crossed in this unfortunate way. On the other hand, it must be remembered that Romeo and Juliet would not have been prone to such 'unhappy fortune', vulnerable to such tragic accidents, if their families had not historically been at such vicious loggerheads: after all, it was the family feud which necessitated the network of go-betweens in the first place.

Rightly afraid of the consequences of his failed plan, Friar Laurence makes preparations to visit the Capulet crypt in an effort to retrieve the situation. Although he remains typically optimistic, Friar Laurence's last line –

> Poor living corse, closed in a dead man's tomb!

– pronounces another sentence upon Juliet. She is a 'poor living corse' [= already as good as dead] simply because the Friar's optimism that his Plan B will work is conspicuously out of place 'in this loathsome world'.

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ACT V Scene 3

In this final scene, the courses of the protagonists converge upon the Capulet vault. From his reference to 'yond yew trees', it is clear that Paris has entered the churchyard in order to pay homage to Juliet's tomb; he approaches her grave with flowers and sweet water in an innocent attempt to pay his last respects. Over Juliet's grave, he speaks a poem that testifies to his true love for her; as a measure of this love, he is prepared to perform funeral rites 'nightly'.

Here, Shakespeare's aim is to establish Paris ('gentle', 'valiant') as a man of good character: when he becomes caught up in the plot, his death will then be felt as another tragic loss. With Paris, human kindness will die another death; once more, a good intention – his resolve to honour Juliet's grave – will have paved a road to perdition.

Page whistles

Paris' page whistles to warn him that Romeo is approaching. Romeo attempts to deceive his own page (Balthasar) into believing that his own descent into Juliet's tomb has an innocent motive – to retrieve 'a precious ring' – but his fierce warning to Balthasar ("By heaven, I will tear thee joint by joint") alerts his servant to an ulterior motive: "His looks I fear, and his intents I doubt." The stage-direction *Balthasar retires* indicates that he does not flee, but merely retreats to a safe distance and thereby becomes a reliable observer of the fatal events.

Romeo approaches Juliet's tomb as if hungry for his own death: "I'll cram thee with more food." Gruesome and melodramatic though his images are, Romeo's actions are both controlled and resolute. Against the charge that he acts rashly and wildly, it can be argued that Romeo is a romantic hero. Given the evidence in front of him, he is entitled to believe/feel certain that Juliet is dead; it can therefore be said that, in electing to commit suicide, he responds to this apparent certainty with a mature courage. He comes to terms with Juliet's premature death, honourably and poetically complementing it with his own.

There follows a scene that might easily deteriorate into a pantomime. From his hiding place, it looks to Paris as if Romeo ('that banished haughty Montague') is proposing to engage in necromancy/necrophilia: that is, have sexual relations with a dead body. It is a further measure of Paris' good and noble character that he would rather apprehend his rival than watch him desecrate Juliet's grave: 'do some villainous shame'. Upon seeing Romeo open Juliet's tomb, Paris leaps forth and apprehends him: "I will apprehend him". When he dies needlessly in his effort to preserve Juliet's honour, the nobility of his intervention serves simply to heighten our sense of tragic loss; for him, the tragic irony is that Romeo ('vile Montague') is the very last person who would dishonour Juliet.

The confrontation between Romeo and Paris sheds a clear light on Romeo's changed character. His single line –

> Good gentle youth, tempt not a desperate man

– contains both an epithet ('Good gentle youth') that patronises Paris and an adjective ('desperate') that reveals Romeo's degree of self-awareness. Romeo, knowing that he is in dire straits, implores Paris not to fight him. Romeo's experience with Juliet has put life and death into a fresh perspective; he is *less* hot-headed and impulsive than he was before and therefore entreats Paris (who is, after all, a youth of the same age) to let discretion be the better part of his valour. Shakespeare intends us to feel that Romeo is a pacifist, a fierce man made gentle by a woman's love. Paris' death, then, is made more tragic by our knowledge that he picked an unnecessary fight. Once again, the feud claims a victim; it was Paris' pre-conceived notion of the 'haughty Montague' that led to his death.

On realising whom he has killed, Romeo is contrite; he realises that, like himself, Paris has acted out of respect for Juliet. Over Paris' dead body, Romeo then exhibits great generosity

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of spirit; this magnanimity ("I'll bury thee in a triumphant grave") is the conclusive proof of his maturity.

He opens the tomb
The stage-direction signifies that Romeo enters Juliet's tomb and discovers her body. He makes a familiar comparison:

> For here lies Juliet, and her beauty makes
> This vault a feasting presence full of light.

He reiterates the idea (first expressed in Act II Scene 2) that Juliet's beauty is as radiant as the sun: ironically, she appears to be able to transform darkness into light/ death into life. As he does so, tension mounts: will he read the signs of life in her face and realise that she is still alive?

Romeo, not knowing that Juliet is merely in a coma, begins to contemplate his own death. He is interested to note that he feels 'merry' at the prospect; he is joyful that, by his suicide, he will be joining Juliet in death and indeed likens this reciprocal gesture to a violent flash of 'lightning' that illuminates an ordinary existence. T. J. B. Spencer concludes that "the intensity of the play lies in its presentation of love rather than death." Proving this point, Romeo refuses to go gentle into that good night: by dying for Juliet, he sees himself as making a heroic statement about the importance of their love.

Dramatic irony at Romeo's expense accompanies his reflections on Juliet's complexion. He observes that there is still colour in her cheeks and is naturally puzzled by this 'crimson' shade:

> Ah, dear Juliet,
> Why art thou yet so fair?

Tragically, he does not know – whereas we do – that Juliet is merely comatose: in other words, that there is a logical answer to his rhetorical question. Once again, Romeo extends a familiar metaphor: his comparison of death to a 'lean abhorrèd monster' who has kidnapped Juliet 'to be his paramour' reminds us how tragic it is that Romeo and Juliet must die before they can enjoy a full married life. At his death, Romeo – whilst 'merry' – is acutely aware that Fate has worked against him. Explicitly, he declares that he is taking his own life in order to escape the unpropitious circumstances in which he has had to live and love:

> O here
> Will I set-up my everlasting rest
> And share the yoke of inauspicious stars
> From this world-wearied flesh.

These last words make it clear that Romeo, though still only a youth, is weary of a world in which the stars look inauspiciously down at him. It is to escape the burden of such an unlucky lot that this 'desperate pilot' [earlier, 'a betossèd soul'] runs his ship – steered off course by these troublesome 'stars' – upon the rocks. His diction ('thy seasick weary bark') extends his chosen metaphor and confirms that he is both sick and weary of the world; for this sickness, the potion that the Apothecary gave him is the only 'true' remedy. Blaming Fate, Romeo ("Thus with a kiss I die") gives Juliet one last kiss and *falls*.

Romeo's death is the signal for Friar Laurence's entrance *with lantern, crow and spade*. With Balthasar, Friar Laurence discovers 'some ill unthrifty thing': namely, that both Paris and Romeo are dead. From the language of his analysis, it is clear that the Friar –

> Ah, what an unkind hour
> Is guilty of this lamentable chance!

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– is fatalistic: not unreasonably, he attributes this bloody outcome simply to the cruel mischance by which his messenger was prevented from delivering his letters to Romeo. Quite literally, the plague [= 'infectious pestilence'] that detained Friar John was a plague on both of the houses. Donald A. Stauffer comments: "If the theme of personal responsibility were not drowned out by the theme of fate, it might be argued that the lovers' deaths in the tomb are caused by Romeo's sudden decision to buy the poison, and again by his immediate suicide when he mistakes Juliet's sleep for death." Already, Romeo's considered response to Juliet's interment has weakened this argument. Now, Juliet's conduct further strengthens the counter-argument …

It is another 'lamentable chance' that Juliet should emerge from her drowsy slumber not ten minutes earlier, but at this moment. Typically and sadly, her first thought is for Romeo: "Where is my Romeo?" Friar Laurence's reply answers her question in a philosophical manner:

> A greater power than we can contradict
> Hath thwarted our intents.

He accounts for Romeo's tragic death, not in terms of the feud, but in terms of 'a greater power' (presumably, 'sitting in the clouds') that perversely thwarts even the very best of human intentions. In the face of this unsympathetic universe, Friar Laurence, previously an optimist, loses his nerve and flees from the scene.

By contrast, Juliet – faced with Romeo's suicide – exhibits enormous courage. She goes so far as to reproach Romeo ('O churl!') for having drunk the cup of poison dry: not only does she resolve to stay by him, but she also decides to die with him. Both Romeo and Juliet are of sound mind; they do not commit suicide while the balances of their minds are disturbed. Like Romeo, Juliet dies with immense dignity and not before she has made a romantic gesture wholly commensurate with his: "I will kiss thy lips." Indeed, Juliet's oxymoronic epithet ('O happy dagger') underlines this point: even though there is no poison left, she is in no way deflected from her purpose. She pursues her destiny; she stabs herself with Romeo's dagger with a sense of poetic justice. Here, then, is an ultimate demonstration in dramatic terms that 'violent delights have violent ends'.

At this stage, the Montagues and the Capulets converge on this 'pitiful sight' in order to witness for themselves the carnage that their bitter feud has caused. In order to highlight the fact that there is a need to apportion blame, the First Watchman puns upon the noun 'ground' [= both 'the earth itself' and 'the reason for the tragedy']. Upon Prince Escalus' arrival, he suggests that Romeo and Juliet (and Paris) have died by 'misadventure'. Rumour has spread throughout Verona that 'foul murder' has taken place. Prince Escalus, as the chief administrator of the city, looks immediately for the culprits. Old Montague arrives with the news that Lady Montague – unable to cope with her son's exile – has died of a broken heart.[11] Yet another death is added to the series of woes with which this play ends.

Friar Laurence confesses that he is best placed to make sense of this chapter of woes, culminating in 'this direful murder'. His reply to Prince Escalus –

> And here I stand, both to impeach and purge
> Myself condemned and myself excused

– admits his complicity in this sorry episode and acknowledges his culpable naiveté in thinking (as Capulet did in Act IV Scene 2) that 'all things shall be well': after all, it is he who has ignored the wisdom of his own prediction that 'violent delights have violent ends'.

Friar Laurence ('I will be brief') delivers forty lines of blank verse in which he recaps the chain of events. In his account of Juliet's last minutes, the Friar –

[11] Lady Montague is the sixth of the six characters to die; hers is the only death to occur off stage.

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> But then a noise did scare me from the tomb,
> And she, too desperate, would not go with me,
> But, as it seems, did violence on herself

– seeks very lamely to exonerate himself: if he knew that Juliet was 'desperate', then why did he – her true and 'ghostly confessor' – not stay beside her to prevent her from doing 'violence on herself'? At the end of the play, the older generation stands indicted of negligence in the deaths of its children. Prince Escalus tells them so:

> Capulet, Montague,
> See what a scourge is laid upon your hate,
> That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love.

Both Montague and Capulet are contrite and solemn. Graven on their faces are the expressions of bitter regret which have hardened perceptibly in the course of Friar Laurence's long speech: indeed, one point of the Friar's comprehensive retrospection is to allow these attitudes of profound remorse to become fixed in the fathers' faces. Upon hearing again this chapter of accidents, Montague and Capulet become visibly aware that their children have become 'poor sacrifices of our enmity'. Only after it is too late does it dawn on them that Romeo and Juliet have been sacrificed upon the unholy altar of their long-running vendetta.

With this familiar conclusion, Donald A. Stauffer begs to differ: "The secret of the play is that the deaths of the lovers are *not* the result of the hatred between the houses, nor of any other cause except love itself." Stauffer's final analysis is consistent with his argument that the responsibility for the lovers' deaths is 'personal': that Romeo's impetuous actions are primarily to blame. As we have seen, such an account is incomplete, omitting (as it does) to examine the direct extent to which the family feud affects Romeo and Juliet: specifically, it compromises the purity of their intentions and involves them in desperate measures. In Aristotelian terms, the hubristic feud between Montague and Capulet meets its nemesis in the deaths of their children.

At the end of the RSC Production in 1986, the paparazzi gathered to take flash photographs of Montague's announcement that he intends to raise a 'statue in pure gold' in memory of 'true and faithful Juliet'. In the light of events, this generous gesture of rapprochement sounds hollow. At this belated reconciliation, Prince Escalus' final speech –

> A glooming peace this morning with it brings

– contains an oxymoron that makes sense of the cruel paradox in the Montague-Capulet saga: that even love between these families ends in death. His final couplet –

> For never was a story of more woe
> Than this of Juliet and her Romeo

– pronounces a memorable sentence not only upon the two lovers whom Fate (symbolised by 'inauspicious stars') mistreated, but also upon their families for the senselessness of the friction which raised an insurmountable barrier between them. No story can be more woeful than a story of 'death-marked love': that is, an affair in which true love is consummated only in death. At the end, the Montagues and the Capulets bury both their children and their differences.

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